STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 1 | Number 7 (1894) pps. 553-565

The Twenty-Fourth Iowa Volunteers

Chas. L. Longley

ISSN 0003-4827

THE TWENTY-FOURTH IOWA VOLUNTEERS.

FROM WINCHESTER TO DAVENPORT.

BY CHAS. L. LONGLEY.

(Continued from July number.)

II—CEDAR CREEK AND CAMP RUSSELL.

The first paper of the three, to which this sketch of the last year's service of the Twenty-fourth Iowa is restricted, left that regiment on October 10, 1864, encamped with the Army of the Shenandoah on the east, or northeast, bank of Cedar Creek, just where it unites with the North Fork of the Shenandoah. Massanutten, or Three-top, Mountain stretches for several miles along the opposite bank of the river, rising to a considerable height and pushing, at many points, bluffy and seemingly impassable battlements clear to the river's bank. The general course of the Shenandoah here is to the northeast, and Cedar Creek, with many convolutions, runs to the southeast—the two streams making a broadly open Y at their junction. The Winchester Pike crosses the left arm of this Y something like a mile, in a direct line, from the junction. Crooks's eighth corps was encamped between the pike and the river, with an entrenched line near the creek and pickets on the river, while his main camp was some little distance back on higher ground. The nineteenth corps was entrenched along the creek, west, or northwest of the pike; and the sixth corps was encamped to the right and partly in rear of the nineteenth. The fourth brigade, second division—to which the 24th Iowa belonged—held the left of the nineteenth army corps; and consequently but a single regiment—the 28th Iowa—interposed between the 24th and the Winchester Pike, which lay along the summit of a ridge some hundred yards from the position of the regiment.

On October 12th, the sixth corps started toward Washington,

for the purpose of being transferred to Grant's army at Petersburg, but was recalled the next day on account of the arrival of Early's infantry at Fisher's Hill, some three miles up the valley from the Federal position. On this same day General Sheridan was called by telegraph to Washington to consult with the Secretary of War; but being under the impression that the sixth corps was no longer there, Mr. Early, in the vernacular, "got gay" and attacked a reconnoitering column, pushing Thoburn's infantry brigade back a little, but getting decidedly the worst of it from Custer. This delayed Sheridan until the 15; and, after getting started, he was overtaken by a letter from General Wright, whom he left in command, inclosing a message, translated by our signal officers from the Confederate flags, which was signed by Longstreet, and said: "Be ready to move as soon as my forces join you and we will crush Sheridan." This afterward turned out to be a hoax, gotten up by some smart Confederate expressly to fool the Yankees; but it only had the effect to cause all the cavalry—a large part of which was just starting on a long scout—to be ordered back to General Wright; with which, and a letter of caution, General Sheridan left him and proceeded to Washington as planned.

During this time events in camp were a trifle monotonous. Almost every morning a brigade or more would be started before daylight on a reconnoitering trip, while a good part of the rest of the army would be required to stand to arms. This over, there was little doing except the oft-repeated incidents of camp life. The weather was delightful, at least during the day-time; but already the nights were growing rather cool for out-door sleeping. The 24th Iowa had, on the 30th of September, 17 commissioned officers and 353 enlisted men present for duty, with 2 officers and 4 men on detached duty and 1 officer and 11 men sick—making a total present of 388. This would be about the effective strength of the regiment at the time now under consideration. The general health of the men was excellent; but as no clothing had been issued since the beginning of the campaign, there were no

active dudes on the list. Indeed, Major Wright says in his report for October, 1864, that, "Many of the men were nearly barefooted, but well supplied with arms—Springfield rifle-muskets, in excellent condition." On the 14th, however, a full supply of clothing was issued to the brigade—beginning at 10 P. M. and taking the entire night, eliciting the frequent inquiry as to why in *sheol* this could not have been attended to in day time, when there was absolutely nothing else to do.

On the evening of October 18, Lieutenant Colonel Wilds, in command of the 24th, in common with other regimental commanders in the brigade, received orders for the regiment to fall in at 5:30 next morning and stand to arms in the entrenchments along the creek, taking the place of the second brigade, which was ordered out upon a reconnoisance. Everything seemed quiet and peaceful in that beautiful valley. A force sent out during the day reported that Early had fallen back from the advanced position recently taken, and the impression prevailed generally that he knew when he had enough and would not attempt the offensive again at present. The autumn sun made an unusually grand descent behind the North Mountains, flooding the western sky with purple and gold. The bugle calls of the cavalry regiments (something no participant in that campaign will ever forget) came floating down from the outposts on the foothills with tones so clear and sweet as seemed only possible to use in again proclaiming "Peace on earth and good will toward men." So the night fell and the Army of the Shenandoah, surrounded by its cordon of guards, was steeped in unsuspecting slumber.

In that other army, less then five miles distant, very different conditions prevailed. One of Early's divisions was commanded by General John B. Gordon—the same man whose voice recently rang out in the chamber of the United States Senate with the declaration that those who in years gone by wore the gray were now and at all times ready to stand beside those who wore the blue to protect the flag of our common country from anarchistic foes within, as well as from foes without. General Gordon was a man of thought, as well as of ac-

tion. The result of his cogitations was this night put on the boards with himself in the title *role*. For with three divisions of infantry he forded the Shenandoah some five miles below the mouth of Cedar Creek, and, with canteens, bayonets and everything likely to rattle either thrown off or tied down, took to the mountain side and spent the night threading its rugged paths, about 2:30 A. M. reaching a point just above the mouth of the creek. Here the pickets were quietly captured and the river re-crossed at two fords a thousand yards apart; and there you have fourteen thousand men deployed to the left rear of the eighth corps, completely on its flank and only a short half mile away. In the meantime the two remaining divisions of Early's army, commanded by Wharton and Kershaw respectively, starting later in the night, had advanced along the pike to the hamlet of Strasburg, where the latter deflected to the right and marched to a ford near the mouth of Cedar Creek and directly in front of the eighth corps entrenchments, then occupied by Thoburn's division only. Wharton, for his part, followed the pike, halting a little over a mile from where it crossed the creek, which placed him on the left front of the nineteenth corps.

Such was the general situation in the early morning of October 19, 1864. And while these details may not seem apropos in connection with a paper whose purpose is a brief sketch of the comparatively small part taken by a single regiment, they nevertheless enforce themselves upon our attention. For not only is it impossible to intelligently comprehend never so small a part of any battle without some idea of the whole, but it is also true that Cedar Creek was the most striking and romantic of all the battles during the war of the rebellion; and that often as its story may have been told, it will still be found worth telling. It was under the circumstances and conditions thus imperfectly set forth, that Major Wright rose about five o'clock, according to the arrangement with Lieutenant Colonel Wilds, and went quietly down the line arousing the company officers in order that the men might be ready for the duty assigned. And it was some half hour later,

while the command was slowly resolving itself into the condition of a military machine, that all were alike startled and surprised by a ringing volley of musketry, much too close at hand to be easily explained. This was followed by scattering shots that seemed further away—but by nothing tending to solve the mystery. The reader will readily apprehend what had happened; that the first volley was fired when Kershaw rushed over Thoburn's breastworks, and the scattering shots came when the divisions with Gordon advanced into the unprotected camps of the remainder of the eighth corps. In both cases the Union men were as completely surprised as is possible—the "Yanks" making an undignified exit from one end of the "dog tent" just as "Johnny Reb" stuck his head into the other end to say, "good morning." But all this was as yet wholly unknown and unsuspected by the remainder of the army. Major Wright rode up to brigade headquarters, but although he found the officers outside standing about the fire, no information could be gained, and back he went to the regiment, which, under command of Colonel Wilds, had fallen in along the color line, but now began getting breakfast. Few, if any, of the coffee pots had boiled, however, when orders came to again fall in, move by the left, and form along the pike. It was now between 6:30 and 7:00 o'clock, but a fog so dense hung over the valley, that, to quote Colonel Wright, "A stand of colors could not be distinguished twenty yards away." And it was from out of this darkness, made blacker by a near background of foliage, that this advance was met, just as it reached the pike, with a withering volley of musketry. And as the command, still moving and only partially in line along the new front, sought to reply, they saw, away up the pike to our left and rear, silhouetted against the eastern sky, file after file of men crossing in serried array. And this was not all: Wharton, who halted at 5:30, little more than a mile west of where the pike crosses the creek, has advanced, captured the battery guarding the crossing and is now pressing forward on our right. The men were falling rapidly and the capture of the entire brigade imminent, when the order

was given to fall back. Those who still could go, stood not upon the style of the movement. It was a race—not to the rear, so far as the original position of our line was concerned, but through the ravines and over the ridges up and along the creek. And although a number were hurt later in the day, it was here that the principal loss of the regiment occurred, including all the prisoners. It was here that Captain Pound, of Company C, was struck by a minie, fairly on the heel of his army brogan, just as the foot was raised in the act of stepping. The impact hurled him to the ground, under the confirmed impression that his leg was gone; but a quick "try" with both hands proved the contrary and he was glad to scramble up and again join the procession. Here, and very early in the retreat, a musket ball passed through Major Wright's left arm, close to the elbow, striking but not breaking the bone. The immediate result was extreme nausea. Colonel Wilds was riding near him, carrying the colors of an Indiana regiment whose bearer had fallen in the melee. Being told of Major Wright's sickness, the latter was advised to lean over the horse and put his arms about his neck; which he did, thus saving himself from falling until he was able to dismount. And it was very soon after this, about the time the retreat passed over Meadow Brook, that the gallant Wilds was himself struck from his horse by a musket ball that shattered his arm above the elbow, and it was with difficulty that he was assisted from the field to a place of safety. And here it was that Weeks, a bright Corporal of B, Channell, a fine young Sergeant in D, Nichols, Carney and others, were stricken with sudden death, while many more fell with cruel wounds.

The scene of this retreat was indeed a wild one. The flying Federals heard in the hideous uproar the moans of starving comrades in Andersonville and redoubled their efforts. Officers and men were falling every instant, while close behind, and beside as well, pressed the exultant rebels, firing constantly and yelling like demons. But the sixth corps had been on the move; and now, after a retreat of nearly two miles, the 24th, as well as the rest of the nineteenth corps, found an opportun-

ity to reform on the right and rear of that command. At its first contact with the enemy the 6th corps was badly overlapped on its left, and in retiring slowly and in perfect order, making sharp resistance at every available point, and again falling back before getting involved, this body of troops performed superb service and made a most magnificent exhibition of bravery and skill. During Major Wright's sickness, which lasted nearly an hour, the 24th was commanded by Captain L. Clark, who had long before been commissioned Major, but not properly mustered. But just after taking position on the right of the 6th, Major Wright again assumed command and held it throughout the day.

The dash and vigor of the enemy's attack began gradually to wane as the resistance grew more effective; and by the time the tactics of the sixth corps (in which the nineteenth corps participated after its arrival) had cleared the left flank, its final position some three miles to the rear of the Cedar Creek line was held with no difficulty. Much time was consumed in re-arranging the Confederate troops to meet the new disposition of the Federal Army, and Early himself complains bitterly of the way in which his divisions were weakened by the many who stopped to gather the rich booty offered to straggling plunderers in the Union camps. With no new element, the contest would undoubtedly have ended here—the rebels falling back shorn of complete victory, but carrying with them substantial proofs of great success in the shape of 24 pieces of captured artillery and many small arms, as well as some hundreds of prisoners. But about this time, namely, eleven o'clock A. M., a new element *did* appear on the scene in the person of "Little Phil" himself, after the ride from "Winchester, twenty miles away," so celebrated in song and story. And song and story has seldom found so literal a basis for so dramatic an episode. For Sheridan's magnificent black horse *did* bring him toward the sounds of battle like a whirlwind; dispirited stragglers along the road *did* turn as he passed and with renewed courage again seek the front; and Sheridan, finally arriving there alone, *did* "dash down the line 'mid a

storm of huzzas," assuring the men that they were "not licked by a blankety blank blanked sight, but would be back in their old camps before night." And so they were. It was almost four o'clock before the dispositions were made exactly to the General's liking; but when the advance was finally ordered, it swept down over the plateau like a tidal wave. The desperate efforts of Early and his lieutenants to resist were futile. Custer led a cavalry charge on the right and Lowell on the left, and the entire Confederate army was in a panic-stricken flight, resulting in the loss to them not only of fourteen hundred prisoners, but also of all their own artillery as well as that captured from us earlier in the day, and in fact, of everything on wheels which had been brought over the creek.

When the nineteenth corps took its place on the right of the sixth corps, the 24th Iowa was on the left of the former and next to the latter; but about noon Major Wright received orders to move to the extreme right and protect the flank, which he did, throwing out a heavy skirmish line. When the final advance was ordered, such brief notice was given the regiment that it became necessary to double-quick a mile to regain its place in the line—the enemy's shells coming over and exploding in the rear, making this an especially interesting performance. And when the continuing advance finally brought them where they could see over the field, clear to Cedar Creek, the Major says the pursuit was being pushed so close that you "absolutely couldn't tell where the rebels left off and our fellows began." By six o'clock the regiment was back in its old camp sure enough, and halted there to make coffee. Here, also, were found quite a number of our wounded. Most of these had been left because they were unable to march, but Captain Knott, of Company H, had succeeded in escaping by making himself look so much like the dirty crevice into which he had crept that the Johnnies went away and never saw him. In their hasty departure "they were unable to tell which was dirt and which was Knott." Everything of value had been taken from the camp, leaving the men without shelter tents or blankets; and when they were pushed on beyond Cedar Creek and

bivouaced on a bleak northern hillside without fires, it was to spend about as uncomfortable a night as fell to their lot during the service.

It was here that Major Wright for the first time was able to have his arm dressed, by this time so swollen that the coat-sleeve could with difficulty be removed. He had also received a severe and troublesome bruise on the hip, caused no doubt by a passing fragment of shell, as the skin was not broken, although the clothing was torn away. Here also came the evening roll-call and the sad attempt to account for those who failed to answer, as killed, wounded or missing. The actual casualties of the battle, not so large as on some previous occasions, were nevertheless quite sufficient, amounting to one officer and 10 enlisted men killed or mortally wounded, five officers and 36 men wounded, and two officers and 39 men captured; total, 93. Those killed or who died of wounds were as follows: Lieutenant-Colonel John Q. Wilds, Joseph Conway, Corporal Carlos F. Weeks, Sergeant Chester F. Channell, Corporal A. C. McCoy, Morris Mink, William Franks, Sergeant McB. Nichols, George S. Smith, Peter Carney, Sidney B. Diamond.

Colonel John Q. Wilds, although brave to a fault, was an exceptionally tender-hearted man, and was most highly regarded, personally, by those under his command. The wound received by him should not have cost him his life, but under the circumstances and conditions such was the unfortunate result. Just the day before the battle of Winchester, one month earlier, Colonel Wilds learned of the death of his wife, to whom he was devotedly attached. She left him two beautiful little daughters, and on the very day before the battle of Cedar Creek, came to him the tidings that one of these had gone to join her mother, while the other was dangerously ill. This left him very despondent, and he not only appeared to abandon hope from the moment of his injury, but positively refused to permit the amputation of his arm. Blood-poisoning resulted, from which, at Winchester, on the 18th of November, 1864, he died. If anything need be added to this sad story concerning

Colonel Wilds and his family, it is found in the further fact that the death of his remaining daughter took place at so nearly the same moment as his own that although the disposal of his quite considerable estate depended alone upon which one of them lived longest, the court, after the fullest possible hearing, was unable to determine, and the property was by consent divided equally between the relatives of the Colonel and those of his wife. A brother of Colonel Wilds came from Pennsylvania to Winchester while he lay wounded, and took his remains to Mt. Vernon, Iowa, where in the quiet little cemetery the family were reunited. The Colonel was a native of Pennsylvania, where he was born in 1825. He had been a merchant much of his adult life, was a man of more than average intelligence, of refinement and of the most intense patriotism. He was a kind friend, a brave soldier and a loyal soul. May he rest well.

Among the wounded and captured officers, mention has already been made of the escape of Captain A. R. Knott, by hiding while under guard, during the battle. Lieutenant C. H. Kurtz, being severely wounded in the foot, was also left on the field. Captain W. W. Smith of Co. G and Lieutenant Charles Davis of Co. A, both taken in the early morning, went into a long and tedious captivity, from which Lieutenant Davis finally escaped at Danville, Va., the next February, reaching our lines after great privation and danger. Captains A. M. Loomis and E. H. Pound were both slightly wounded. Of the 36 wounded men, many were severely hurt and never again rejoined their companies; while the fortune of those who were taken prisoners was, if possible, still more trying and unhappy.

As one of the incidents of the battle it might be mentioned that Colonel Wilds' horse escaped when his rider was shot and was unheard of for several weeks. He had, it transpired, received three wounds during the battle, one of which totally paralyzed his fly-disturber; and when finally discovered at Winchester in another command, there was some uncertainty in regard to his identity. This, however, was set at rest by procuring an interview between "Old Charley," the horse, and

"Old John," the colored brother who had taken care of him. The recognition was mutual and so obvious as to set at rest any doubt that might have existed. Major Wright's horse also received three bullets, but although one of them passed clear through her neck, she carried her master throughout the day. The neck wound, by the way, proved an entire cure for a case of "moon eyes" of long standing, and Colonel Wright is now prepared to recommend shooting through the neck as a panacea for that ailment.

The news of the victory at Cedar Creek was received with great rejoicing throughout the country, and like that at Winchester was signalized by General Grant with a salute of one hundred shotted guns, fired into Petersburg. The President sent General Sheridan an autograph letter of warm congratulation, which was read to every regiment on the evening of Oct. 24, and received with most enthusiastic applause—the cheers that rose from one command after another re-echoing from the environing mountains as a fantastic requiem to the many voiceless comrades who lay in shallow graves along the line of the old camps, to which the several regiments had returned three days previously. The weather was unusually cold directly after the battle, especially at night, and no little suffering resulted; but this was largely mitigated by an issue of clothing and blankets on the 21st, the day the regiment returned to its former camp. Upon the 25th the regiment, in common with the entire brigade, received four month's pay—the entire payment being made, for some inscrutable reason, between five o'clock in the evening and daylight the next morning. Very soon after this the regiment was sent to Martinsburg as a train guard, thus giving the boys an excellent and well improved opportunity to invest their newly acquired wealth in unaccustomed luxuries.

The succeeding three weeks were devoted to the not exceedingly desirable duty of guarding trains over the twenty odd miles of road subject to Mosby's raids, with alternate rests of from one to three days at the front and Martinsburg. The notable incident during this time was *election*, which was held

Nov. 8, near Martinsburg. Mr. John Mahin, of Muscatine, was the commissioner to take the votes of the three Iowa regiments in that army, and set up the ballot box for the 24th on the warm side of a huge boulder, where the writer had the privilege of casting his first vote for the great emancipator for President. No challenging was done; "old enough to fight, old enough to vote," seemed to be accepted, although there were those who acknowledged themselves minors and did not attempt voting. These could not have been many, however, as 303 votes were cast, out of which Lincoln received 285 and McClellan 18, more than half of the latter being cast by a single company.

Snow had already fallen and all became unpleasantly aware of a colder climate than had been before experienced during two years, when, on November 17, the order to prepare winter quarters was received with great enthusiasm. The camp was at once alive with busy workers, and on the 21st the pocket diary before referred to says: "The work of building winter quarters is practically done. The rows of neatly built and comfortable huts seem miracles considering the means at command. A hatchet and spade were all the tools used by the most favored; and with a few logs, slabs and boards, and dog tents for roofs, they made pretty good houses." General Sheridan, in orders, named this Camp Russell, after the brave cavalry officer killed in the final charge at Cedar Creek; and it was the home of the regiment for the remainder of the year, and practically of its sojourn in the valley. Not much of interest attaches to this period. One of the mornings showed a snow-fall of fifteen inches, and it was quite refreshing to hear the cursory remarks with which the boys delved into it to find wood enough to boil coffee. Another day brought an exciting panorama, when a number of men from our own and adjoining infantry regiments went into a deserted cavalry camp less than a mile in our front and were caught there by a squad of Mosby's guerrillas. The chase, as seen from camp, was both serious and amusing. Two members of the 24th were captured; but after being robbed and actually stripped of their clothing,

were permitted to return, which they did quickly and gladly, but in a very destitute and demoralized condition.

On December 30th, Grover's division was taken out of the comfortable quarters at Camp Russell and sent to the terminus of the military railway, now in operation to with in two or three miles of Winchester. The 24th Iowa, however, was excepted, being sent to the town itself for special duty at Post headquarters. This was considered quite an honor; and as Lieutenant-Colonel Wright (now properly mustered as such, with Captain Clark, of Company E, as Major) was told at Sheridan's headquarters that this arrangement was permanent, the men went cheerfully at work to again construct winter quarters. In four or five days better ones than ever had sprung into existence—one "mess" with two or three bricklayers actually indulging in brick walls.

January 4, four fortunate officers of the regiment and 15 lucky men received the leaves and furloughs which authorized them to make the trip to Iowa; and it was with hungry, but by no means unfriendly eyes that the rest of us stood about and saw them start. Next day, at 7:00 P. M., came orders to be ready to take the cars early on the morning of the 6th. And while the men of the 24th are busy securing the prescribed three days' rations, mourning over the sudden end of the dreams of easy life in winter quarters and speculating as to the possibilities of their unknown destination, we leave them for the present.

KE-O-KUCK.—A sale of lots in this village, and a portion of the farming lands within the surveyed part of the Half-Breed Lands, will take place on Wednesday next. This place is situated on the west bank of the Mississippi, about 200 miles above St. Louis; immediately at the foot of the lower rapids, where, during the low stages of water, the steamboats land, and lighten their boats in order to pass over. The landing is inferior to none on the river—the back country is represented as being beautiful, well watered, and, as soon as the lands are divided and sold must become settled by hardy and industrious farmers.—*Iowa News, (Dubuque,) June 10, 1837.*